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ABSTRACT

An important issue with respect to intergenerational relationships between aging parents and their adult children is the influence of the father's retirement. Interview data were collected from 84 non-retired and 40 retired couples to determine whether retirement was related to the frequency and quality of intergenerational contacts. Couples were in their early and mid 60s, in good health, and financially comfortable. Thus, filial obligation was not a reason for adult children to keep in touch. The results of the interviews revealed no difference in joint social activities or in the emotional support and instrumental services pre-retirement and retired couples and their children exchanged. The quality of the contact also did not vary by retirement status. Possible explanations for this lack of differences include the emphasis on older persons' independence in the United States, the parents' financial and physical well being that permitted them to pursue non-family interests, and respondents' pleasure in being free from parental responsibilities. These findings provide evidence of continuity in family life over the retirement transition. (Author/NB)

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RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN PARENTS AND THEIR ADULT CHILDREN: DOES RETIREMENT MAKE A DIFFERENCE?*

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Relationships Between Parents and Their Adult Children: Does Retirement Make a Difference?

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ABSTRACT

Interview data from 124 pre-retirement and retired couples are used to determine whether retirement is related to the frequency and quality of intergenerational contacts. Couples were in their early and mid sixties, in good health and financially comfortable. Thus, filial obligation was not a reason for adult children to keep in touch. There was no difference in joint social activities, or the emotional support and instrumental services pre-retirement and retired couples and their adult children exchange. The quality of the contacts also did not vary by retirement status. Discussion of the results covers the following: emphasis on older persons' independence in the United States: the couples' financial and physical well being that permits them to pursue non-family interests; their pleasure in being free from parental responsibilities; and the increasing evidence of continuity in family life over the retirement transition.

Relationships Between Parents and Their Adult Children: Does Retirement Make a Difference?

An important issue with respect to intergenerational relationships between today's aging parents and their adult children is the influence of fathers ' retirement. This event is usually used to indicate the last stage in the family career (Duvall and Hill, 1948). It follows the so-called empty nest period when adult children have left home, and parents, particularly fathers in today's older cohorts, continue to be in the labor force. Despite the considerable amount of research on retirement, less attention has been given to how retirement affects contacts between parents in their sixties and their children. This investigation attempts to redress the balance. Its focus is on the less often examined intergenerational contacts of pre-retirement and retirement couples in their early and middle sixties who are physically well and financially fit. They and their children keep in touch not because of parental need in these two areas.

Retirement results in two fundamental changes-- one in income and one in available time. Median family income decreases on an average 50 percent from the previous pre-retirement year according to one study of male retirees in the National Longitudinal Surveys of Labor Market Experience (Parnes and Less, 1983: 72-75). This decrease in income results in decreases in level of living. Retired as compared with non-retired couples cut expenditures on necessities, although they spend about the same for transportation and more on gifts and contributions (McConnel and Deljavan, 1983).

Along with these changes due to income decreases, goes an increase in

free time as job responsibilities disappear. This allows more husband-wife interaction with the possibility for a changed household division of labor, increased joint activities or heightened conflict. Despite the fears of some wives (Fengler, 1975), there is little evidence that their household routines will be disrupted with husbands around the house on a full-time basis (Brubaker and Hennon, 1982). Generally, there is continuity from the pre-retirement period in the kind of tasks husbands and wives perform although there can be more joint performance and less gender related task assignment (Dobson, 1983). When husbands increase their activities, it often appears to be in areas like yard work, where they were earlier primarily responsible (Keith and Brubaker, 1979).

According to one study of 208 middle class couples, retired couples appear to spend more time together. The study showed couples enjoying the intimacy arising from shared interests, especially those centering on family ties (Atchley and Miller, 1983). Thus, the retirement period generally results in couple financial and interaction changes that separate it from the pre-retirement period.

There is also some suggestion that relations with adult children increase in importance. Factors favoring a change in intergenerational relations have to do with the greater numbers of hours retired couples have to devote to their children. No longer busy with office or factory schedules, men as well as women may look to family concerns to fill up empty time. This is what was found in one study of intergenerational relations of persons varying in age from 18-to 65 (Schulman, 1975). But the change appeared to be gradual, with kin contacts filling in as child rearing and job tending activities demanded less time.

The present study, therefore, addresses the issue of just how much, if

any change in parent adult contacts occurs with retirement. It would seem that the availability of sizable blocks of time resulting from the loss of work activities would mean a commensurate increase in activities involving children. But children may experience conflicting loyalties with time demands from their own spouses, children and jobs, limiting the amount of time they can devote to their parents. In the Schulman research cited above, for example, young singles were more attentive to their parents than young marrieds. This was also true in the sample used in the present study (Aldous, 1985). Singles, since they have no families of their own, can be particularly attentive, even though parents are not in ill health or financially needy, two characteristics likely to awaken children's sense of filial obligation. Based on the existing literature, however, we hypothesize that couples where the husband is retired will report more activities involving adult children regardless of marital status than will couples where the husband is still employed.

STUDY DESIGN

Sample and Data Collection. The 124 couples in the study were drawn from 1936-1940 married male graduates of a midwestern Catholic university. This population was selected to obtain a number of large families, since family size was a critical variable in other aspects of the study (Aldous and Klein, 1986). To be included in the sample, the parents had to be in an intact marriage. Of the couples contacted and eligible to participate, 53 percent agreed to be in the study. The fathers were or had been employed in professional, technical or managerial occupations. About one-third (44) of them had already retired.

Both parents were interviewed together about the frequency, type and quality of contacts they had experienced in the previous year with their children who had left home. Each parent also separately completed a questionnaire covering child-rearing practices, demographic data and feelings about each child (Aldous, Klaus, and Klein, 1985).

Intergenerational Contact Indicators. The study data come from couple responses to interview questions concerning joint social activites with children along with the emotional help and services they give to and receive from children. The social activities included the following: spending holidays, birthdays and other special occasions together; going out together; informal home visits; and joint participation in church or community activities. Emotional help covered the following: phoning or writing letters just to find out how things are; and giving comfort when someone was upset. Services included the following: transportation; care when someone was ill; help with housework; help with shopping; monetary help or gifts of $50 or less; and over $50 in value.

Other Variables. To determine whether factors other than retirement status of the husband could affect the results, we compared the two groups of couples first on personal characteristics associated with intergenerational contacts. These t-test analyses did show significant group differences in the husbands' ages and the duration of marriages although not in the wives' ages. Retired husbands were about two years older on an average, being 65.4 years as compared with 63.5 years for the non-retired husbands.

Table 1 About Here

Wives of retired husbands were 62.4 years of age and the wives of non-retired husbands, 61.2 years of age. Retired couples had been married on average 38.4 years and the non-retired couples, 36.5 years.

To determine if the differences were related to the health of these generally healthy couples, a factor that might affect parent-child contacts, we looked at how wives reported their own and their spouses' health. There were no differences in the proportions in the two groups reporting their own or their husbands' health to be less than good.

The final factor involving couple characteristics we examined that could affect the findings was employment status of wives. If they were employed outside the home, they would have less time to devote to children. Comparatively few wives were so employed, and the proportions were similar in the two groups.

We also looked at children's characteristics that could influence the results. There was no difference in the proportion of children in the particular families who had left home in the retired and non-retired groups. This was important, since the number of launched children, even though the contact indicators are per child averages, might affect the contact frequency. The geographical proximity of the children, a factor that sets limits on the amount of face to face contact, did not differentiate the groups. Since parents and daughters tend to keep in closer touch (Adams, 1970; Aldous, 1967), we also checked to see if our two groups were differentiated on the average proportion of daughters the couples had among their launched

Table 1: General Characteristics of Retired and Non-Retired Couples*

Characteristics	Retired Couples		Non-Retired Couples			
	N	$\bar{X}$	N	$\bar{X}$		t
Husbands' Age	40	65.4 Years	83	63.5	Years	4.396[a]
Wives' Age	40	62.4 Years	83	61.2	Years	1.619
Duration of Marriage	40	38.4 Years	84	36.5	Years	2.495[a]
						X^2
Husbands' Health						0.717
a) Good	33		74			
b) Bad	7		10			
Wives' Health						0.717
a) Good	37		75			
b) Bad	2		8			
Wives' Employment Status						1.972
a) Employed	8		27			
b) Unemployed	32		57			

*Ns vary due to missing responses

[a]Probability $< .05$

children. Again, this possible biasing influence did not appear.

We also compared the proportion of married children, those married with their own children as well as the proportion of divorced children and the proportion of divorced daughters having children (See Table 2). Other analyses with the present data (Aldous, 1985) have shown marital and parental status of children to affect intergenerational contacts. Parents tend to have more contact with single offspring and divorced daughters with children, apparently because they are more needy of assistance. Singles

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Table 2 About Here

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are not yet settled in family careers and like divorced parents lack the companionship that spouses ordinarily provide. Parents also are more apt to aid their single children with financial gifts than their married children who are themselves parents. Divorced daughters with children have more need for child care help from parents than their married siblings.

The retired and non-retired groups showed few significant differences on the marital and parental status of their children. Retired couples did have more adult daughters who were divorced. They also had more married children who themselves had children. Both of these factors should encourage retired couples to have more contacts than non-retired couples with their children.

Analyses. Controlling for family size, we compared the average number of parent-child contacts per child for the previous year on the particular indicator for each couple. T-tests provided the means for comparing the retired and non-retired groups on the dependent variables.[1]

Table 2: Characteristics of the Children of Retired and Non-Retired Couples*

Characteristics	Retired Couples		Non-Retired Couples		
	N	$\bar{X}$	N	$\bar{X}$	t
Geographic Proximity to Parents (miles)	40	505.6	84	464.7	0.3620
	N	Proportion	N	Proportion	Z
Children Who Are Launched	152	0.882	378	0.847	1.092
Launched Who Are Daughters	133	0.451	319	0.502	-0.992
Launched Who Are Married	132	0.682	316	0.655	0.556
Launched Who Are Married with Children	134	0.582	320	0.475	2.101[a]
Launched Who Are Divorced	134	0.104	320	0.041	2.202[a]
Launched Daughters Who Are Divorced	60	0.150	160	0.044	2.169[a]
Launched Daughters Who Are Divorced with Children	60	0.083	160	0.013	1.906

*Ns vary due to sub-groupings and/or missing responses.

[a]Probability $< .05$.

The Findings

The results concerning intergenerational contacts appear in Tables 3 and 4. Let us begin with joint social activities in Table 3. On none of the indicators, whether getting together for holidays and other special occasions, informal home visits, going out together, or participating together in church or community activites, was there a statistically significant difference between the two groups of couples.

Table 3 About Here

With respect to emotional support, (see Table 4) from parents to children and children to parents much the same results appeared. The differences were larger but not statistically significant. Retired parents were somewhat less likely to supply comfort to children when they were upset. More consistent with our hypothesis, however, was the somewhat greater tendency of retired parents to do more telephoning and letter writing to children. Similar differences appeared when we examined parents' reports of their children's emotional support. Children of retired parents were less apt to supply comfort when a parent was upset but more apt to telephone or to write them.

Table 4 About Here

Table 3: Joint Social Activities of Parents and Children

Activity	Retired Couples		Non-Retired Couples		
	N	$\bar{X}$	N	$\bar{X}$	t
Informal Home visits	141	16.15	363	12.86	1.272
Celebrating Holidays, Birthdays, etc.	40	7.82	84	7.59	0.198
Going Out Together	40	5.85	84	5.84	0.010
Participating Together in Church and Community Activities	40	2.34	84	2.08	0.408

Table 4: Contact of Retired and Non-Retired Couples' with Their Adult Children

	Parents to Children					Children to Parents				
	Retired Couples		Non-Retired Couples			Retired Couples		Non-Retired Couples		
A. Emotional Support	N	$\bar{X}$	N	$\bar{X}$	t	N	$\bar{X}$	N	$\bar{X}$	t
Providing Comfort	39	5.79	84	9.23	-1.419	40	6.05	84	11.89	-1.699
Writing letters and phone visits	40	79.78	84	62.21	1.449	40	42.51	84	36.63	1.373
B. Instrumental Services										
Transportation	40	2.7	84	5.85	-1.926[a]	40	1.93	84	3.36	-1.447
Care and Help During Illness	40	1.76	84	1.72	0.039	40	1.67	84	2.52	-0.688
Help with Housework	40	3.00	84	1.89	0.953	40	5.23	84	6.64	-0.672
Help with Shopping	40	2.44	84	2.72	0.287	40	1.82	84	2.78	-1.287

*Ns vary due to missing responses.

[a]Probability <.06

There was one result on instrumental services that approached statistical significance. It was providing transportation for children. Here, however, retired parents were less active than non-retired parents. When we examined the results concerning the frequency with which children provided services to parents, again the differences that appeared favored children of non-retired parents. Although not statistically significant, they were more likely to provide transportation and to help with shopping.

Discussion

Contrary to our general hypothesis, retired couples did not have more contacts with their children whether in the areas of joint activities, emotional support or services. Neither the retired nor their children appeared to seek each other out more for services, emotional support nor doing things together. Retired couples may have more time to enjoy their family ties, but this enjoyment does not appear to carry over into actual intergenerational contacts.

Retired couples also did not report dissatisfaction with the situation. Both spouses in retired and non-retired couples responded similarly to questions on their questionnaires concerning any disagreements they might have with children concerning the frequency with which they got together and their quality. They reported on average having some or no disagreements with their children on how often they were in touch (scores 2 and 3) and felt often or very happy and satisfied with their relations (scores 4 and 5). See Table 5.

Table 5 About Here

These relatively affluent, healthy couples appear to be involved in activities centering on their own interests. Their education makes them aware of leisure time activities that their financial resources enable them to undertake. Thus, they have less need to use contacts with their children to fill up time. Because they had relatively large families, three to four children on the average, they also appreciate how having grown children lessens the need for parental concern and contacts.

One indication we have of this awareness was their responses to a question about their feelings if an adult child returned home to live. Although the reasons for the return made a difference, with divorce being particularly problematic in this predominantly Catholic sample, the responses were generally negative. Just 29 percent of the wives' 449 comments and 25 percent of the husbands' 445 comments were completely positive. They recognized that children might have to return occasionally, but they wanted the stays to be temporary. The couples wanted to live their own lives. As one wife graphically expressed it, "Oh God! I wouldn't like it. . . I'm tired of waiting on people."

Much of the previous research on intergenerational relations has involved aged couples or widows whose average age was older than the present sample's (c.f. Shanas, 1979; Streib and Beck, 1980). Due to health and companionship needs, these parents, indeed, maintain more contacts

Table 5: Parents' Satisfaction with Contact with Their Children

Characteristic	Retired Couples		Non-Retired Couples		
	N	$\bar{X}$	N	$\bar{X}$	t
Disagreements with Children Frequency of Get-togethers					
a) Husbands' Estimate	40	2.43	84	2.63	-1.690
b) Wives' Estimate	40	2.62	84	2.73	-1.120
Satisfaction with Way Things Are Going with Children					
a) Husbands	40	4.44	84	4.57	-0.971
b) Wives	40	4.52	84	4.59	-0.566

with their children. But our data suggest that younger, financially comfortable couples who are relatively recently retired seem not to need to turn to children to fill the extra time they have available. Over time extra-familial interests may pall. However, continuity between the pre-retirement and retirement periods in parents' contacts with grown children and their satisfaction with the contacts is consistent with other life features of the recently retired. Sexual activity (Ludeman, 1981) and household task performance (Dobson, 1983; Keith & Brubaker, 1979) for example, also show continuity over the retirement transition.

Couples today are more aware due to social security taxes and media coverage that they can expect to spend considerable time together after retirement. Torrey, (1984: 182) estimates the retirement period will account for one-fourth (23 percent) of a current 20 year old's life. The retired are more prepared to fill the time they have with interests they have already developed or want to explore.

Moreover, American values are clear that individuals are better off when they maintain their independence (Bellah et. al., 1985). For older couples, this means not being a burden on children, financially or emotionally. Thus, retired couples are under normative pressure not to occupy a larger portion of their children's lives unless the children, themselves, take the initiative. The norm of filial obligation that they should help and stay in contact with their parents as much as possible is particularly true for children of aging parents. Even without enough to do to keep busy, however, retired couples may strive not to increase their contacts with their children.

Our couples had the health and money to enjoy a range of activities.

Family ties are part of the life of older couples, but our study provides no indication that such couples will need or want to tighten the ties that bind them to their children.

Footnotes

[1] To specify the findings, we give the results for each indicator. They do not differ from those based on adding the scores of indicators that were hightly correlated.

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